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Review of *Living in an Art World:
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Arts in the 1970s and 1980s*, by Noel
Carroll

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Noël Carroll's *Living in an Art World* consists of reviews and essays on dance, performance, theater, and visual fine arts taking place during the 1970s and 1980s. The book is organized into three main sections. Dance is the subject of the first section, followed by sections devoted to performance and theater and the fine arts. Each section and a coda with essays on postmodernism and globalization of art address important theoretical issues raised by the changes in the arts during the second half of the twentieth century.

Carroll's reviews focus mainly on events taking place in the New York artworld during a time of transition from modernism to postmodernism and beyond. Articles reprinted in this volume appeared initially in *Art Forum*, *Soho Weekly News*, *The Village Voice*, *The Drama Review*, *Dance Magazine*, and various journals and exhibition catalogues. Driven by a passion for understanding contemporary avant-garde art and the workings of the artworld, he, like other younger critics and theorists of the time, became "a citizen of the avant-garde art world" (p. 18). Their passion and curiosity created writers bent on exploring every dance, performance art, and gallery opening that the Lower East Side artworld in New York offered. They encountered an artworld where art practices were informed by theory and vice versa. Hence, it will be no surprise to find the reviews selected for this volume laced with questions belonging also to art theory and aesthetics. In the introductory remarks prefacing the respective sections, Carroll interjects qualifications and sometimes doubts about the views expressed in his earlier writings. Taking note of the importance of these writings for understanding the downtown art scene in New York, Arthur Danto remarked in an introduction to the collection: "His collected essays constitute a museum of the unmuseumable" (p. 12).

The twenty-three chapters devoted to dance address singular performances of leading choreographers, including Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer, Twyla Tharp, and Trisha Brown, and also consider broader theoretical matters surrounding these performances. Many of the dancers of the 1970s were drawn to anti-theatrical, anti-illusionist dance. They also acknowledged dance as an independent art. Proponents of anti-theatrical dance who gathered at the Judson Church in lower Manhattan during the 1960s and Yvonne Rainer in the 1970s accepted any form of movement as dance. Concurrently, they rejected expressive, theatrical virtuosity and narrative spectacle. For formalists such as George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham, abstract movement became the main focus in their approaches to dance.

Among the theoretical concerns addressed is the rejection of mimesis in favor of anti-illusionism in the postmodern choreography of the 1960s and 1970s. At the center of the debate among competing twentieth-century approaches to dance was the question of theatrical

versus anti-theatrical approaches to dance. Related to this issue was a disagreement over whether dance should be considered an independent art or simply a variant of theater.

Taking the discussion to a larger plane, Carroll argues that changing practices in the art of dance throughout history tend to reflect successively the prevailing art theories of their time. Prior to the twentieth century, the prevailing mimetic theories (the view that art imitates or copies, resulting in illusionist images) supported a theatrical approach to dance. Yvonne Rainer's anti-theatrical postmodern dance is in part informed by the modernist art theory of Clement Greenberg (p. 35). Carroll cites the influence of Greenberg's view that "art was a form of critique and that integral to critique was anti-illusionism" on Rainer's approach to dance (p. 35). However, the match is not seamless, as Rainer's extension of dance to include everyday movements independent of any formal system of movement does not fit well with Greenberg's formalism.

In Chapter 22, Carroll observes that developments in dance "are occurring in many different directions" (p. 126). Among these is a new form of theatricalism. As a result, minimalist anti-theatrical and formalist dance were displaced in the front line by dance featuring representation, expression, and narrative content. Examples of this new dance are cited in the works of Trisha Brown, Pina Bausch, and Twyla Tharp, among others. Carroll denies that this new theatricalism in dance is simply recycling prior endorsements of mimesis. Rather, he argues that the theatricality of contemporary dance invokes a new paradigm that understands art pluralistically and as anti-essentialist, one in which dance stands in tandem with the reigning conceptions of the arts alongside performance, theater, and gallery arts. The theoretical support for this new paradigm is in need of further development. Also missing in this discussion is clarification of the origins of the concepts or theories of art, that is, whether they emerge independently or concurrently with the practices of the artists.

The section on performance and theater (Chapters 24–48) consists of essays devoted to examining the relation of these two media. "Performance" refers to a widely divergent medium that requires no particular training or setting. It can occur outside in the

street, in a gymnasium, or just as easily in any public space where an audience can be assembled. It may involve the unspecified actions of painters, sculptors, filmmakers, musicians, dancers, or any combination of these.

Carroll distinguishes two types of performance. Art performances emerged as a reaction to objectionable practices in the art galleries. Performance art is a response to mainstream theater where trained actors perform a written text onstage with décor and lighting (pp. 161, 166). Carroll, perhaps wisely, does not offer a definition of performance. Rather, he chooses to characterize performance artists as "an emblem for what is spontaneous, live, free, and authentic" (p. 169) and at the same time a reminder of the constraints imposed by a culture that seeks to impose a countervailing direction.

The connections between performance and theater are elucidated as Carroll critically examines the roots of performance and avant-garde theater in the writings of Antonin Artaud, who offers a polemic against literary theater; Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theater; and Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater. As the discussion evolves, it becomes clear that the theater component Carroll has in mind is the avant-garde theater of the likes of Robert Wilson, Meredith Monk, Ping Chong, Richard Foreman, the Bread and Puppet Theater, and Michael Kirby's structuralist theater. Since these theater works were happening more or less at the same time as the performance art, it makes sense to view the two as a continuation of a shared desire to advance avant-garde arts.

Perhaps one explanation for the shift from performance to avant-garde theater is that, despite the criticisms of traditional theater, theater in its new forms proved to be a more challenging medium. It allowed for exploration of substantive issues in greater depth. Indeed, the migration of avant-garde artists from performance to theater enabled the artists to work "within the enemy's own camp" to engage in subversive activities aimed at unmasking the conventions of the theater and altering its role in society from a vehicle directed toward entertainment to a vehicle for critical reflection. Performance artists brought new freedom that may have influenced changes in

theater itself. For example, action-oriented visual, bodily text that is central to performance may well have altered the theater's reliance on word text.

The section on fine art (Chapters 49–56) addresses the role of fine arts or gallery aesthetics in relation to developments in dance, performance, and theater. Four theoretical essays on the topics, "Anti-illusionism in Modern and Postmodern Art," "A new Theory of Pictures," "Illusions of Postmodernism," and "The Avant Garde and the Problem of Theory," and three exhibition essays relating to contemporary painting, photography, and sculpture make up this part of the book. These essays pose key questions pertinent to all of the arts addressed in this book. For example, Carroll finds that theoretical assumptions behind anti-illusionist and anti-theatrical postmodern dance, performance, and theater as well as the gallery arts are all based on a critique of illusionism. Illusionism (the view that art imitates or copies and thus produces illusions) as perceived by the avant-garde artists of this era was thought to be epistemologically and perhaps even morally inferior because of its ideological associations.

The assumed corrective was anti-illusionist abstract or reflexive art that exposed the distortions of truth as found in illusionist art. In a corresponding argument too complex to enumerate here, Carroll advances the case for the cognitive significance of anti-illusionist (abstract, reflexive) images based on their quality and ingenuity, where they function as symbols to emblemize metaphors or knowledge. Thus, it seems that abstract and reflexive art may contribute to knowledge as ritual observance or expressive enactment without being subject to logical considerations of truth or falsity (p. 284).

The essay on "Illusions of Postmodernism" offers a detailed critique of Hal Foster's poststructuralist theory, namely, that we have entered into a new era of postmodernism where the world consists of symbols or codes of representation. In this new world, the capitalist social order is said to depend on controlling the symbols of cultural representations (p. 315). Within this context, artists may function to unmask through their critique the ideological operations of this system that serve as the means of social control. Carroll remains skeptical of

Foster's analysis of the relation of postmodernism and late capitalist society and raises doubts concerning the effectiveness of a postmodern cultural critique.

In the essay "A New Theory of Pictures," Carroll offers a critical reading of Norman Bryson's theory of painting. But this discussion seems less cogent to the main themes of the collection, so given the limited space available, I will pass over it.

In Chapter 57, "Polarizing Postmodernism?" Carroll challenges the view that postmodernism is suitable as a designator of a global cultural epoch in the sense of the enlightenment or modernism. In his view, "postmodern" may serve useful purposes as a style marker in given local artistic practices such as postmodern dance. But it is not suitable as a label for a coherent global epoch of history. Postmodernism lacks both temporal and thematic coherence according to Carroll (pp. 340, 341). Its correspondence with late capitalism (which began in the 1940s) versus the beginnings of postmodernism in the 1970s is subject to question. Analytic philosophers of history also share postmodernism's rejection of meta-narratives. In short, Carroll concludes that global postmodernism as a historical construct rests on a mistake. We are not in the requisite temporal position to construct a meta-narrative of the time in which we live.

The essay "Avant-garde Art and the Problem of Theory" considers the role of avant-garde artworks in reference to the changing critical frameworks of the late twentieth century (i.e., Greenberg's modernist essentialism, phenomenology, semiotics, post-structuralism, and postmodernism). The central question in this essay is whether avant-garde artworks can contribute to theoretical knowledge (pp. 324, 325). Carroll opposes the notion, assumed by some critics, that avant-garde artworks have the possibility of making contributions to theory. In brief, he argues that avant-garde works do not perform the tasks expected of a theory, that is, "proposing general claims, sketching systematic relationships, elucidating underlying principles and substantiating said hypotheses with evidence and argument" (p. 324). Instead, he finds that avant-garde artworks are parasitic on existing art theories. As such, avant-garde artists are not engaged in theoretical work while creating art, although they may

make references to theories. Again, the question of the origin of such theories remains in need of clarification.

At various points throughout the book, Carroll offers his thoughts on criticism, a subject that he addressed recently in the book *On Criticism*, reviewed in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (67:4, 2009: pp. 421–423). Two essays devoted to criticism, Chapter 23, "Options for Dance Criticism," and Chapter 48, "Organic Analysis," together with the actual reviews written by Carroll, lend further insight into his views on the subject. In his discussion of dance criticism, Carroll introduces three options: descriptive criticism, alternate cultural criticism, and situational criticism. The aim of descriptive criticism is to provide information on what happened in the dance (an account of the critic's direct observations concerning the sensuous surfaces of the dance movement and actions) with as little interpretation as possible. Carroll finds descriptive criticism dull and likely based on faulty assumptions about what will contribute to viewers' appreciation. Alternate cultural criticism takes criticism as applied to other arts, such as applying a Marxist framework applicable to Brecht's theater to Merce Cunningham's dance. Carroll finds this form of criticism is also unlikely to benefit viewers in their appreciation of dance.

In the chapter on dance criticism, Carroll's preferred approach is situational criticism. "The dance critic educates the uninformed audience by first calling attention to a choice that the choreographer has made. That choice is then situated among a matrix of alternative choices and the choice that is actually made is explained in virtue of the choreographer's purpose" (p. 143). In the essay devoted to theater criticism, Carroll introduces "organic criticism." Organic criticism seeks out the coherence among the functional elements of a performance: text, blocking, lighting, set, and acting. Its aim is to supply the viewers with a way of looking at the performance.

It is not clear whether the shift from situational criticism to organic criticism is simply a result of the shift from dance to theater or a rethinking of situational criticism introduced in the discussion of dance criticism. In any event, I find the critical methodologies in both problematic. Who, for example, is the audience for such criticism? I

doubt that such method-driven critical discourse would be sufficient to fire the imagination or interest of most dance audiences. Nor is it clear how being informed of the choreographer's choices and strategies and how she worked them out would necessarily translate into aesthetic appreciation for the dance audience. Perhaps this approach to criticism is aimed at an audience of artists or theorists instead of the public who attends the performances. In fact, during the period that Carroll is writing about, the audiences for New York avant-garde performances might well have been composed mainly of artists, critics, and like-minded individuals gathered to experience the newest developments.

In respect to criticism, the readers might better turn to some of Carroll's actual reviews or perhaps to his more recent book *On Criticism*. I find especially of interest some of the individual performance-theater reviews, for example, those addressed to the dance works of Trisha Brown (pp. 88–90), David Gordon (pp. 82–84), Pooh Kaye (p. 100), and performance-theater works of Jim Burton (p. 197), Ping Chong (p. 227), and Richard Foreman (p. 181), to mention a few examples. Unless I am mistaken, his more successful reviews depend more on description and interpretation than the proposed structural analysis dominating Carroll's preferred theoretical approaches to criticism (situational or organic criticism). Indeed, to the extent that these strategies are actually applied in the reviews, it is with such lingual adroitness that the bare strategies remain well hidden.

Carroll's *Living in an ArtWorld* documents an important moment in the changing landscape of avant-garde arts of the second half of the twentieth century in New York. It will be of value to scholars of dance theory and history as well as for research into the other arts. Simultaneously, it offers challenging theses to aestheticians concerning the main theoretical underpinnings that provide connecting links for dance, performance art and theater, and fine arts during an important period of avant-garde developments across the arts. There is much more to ponder and debate than a short review can reveal, given the complexities of the text. For those familiar with Carroll's extensive writings in aesthetics, it may be of interest to note that the conclusions offered in the theoretical essays published here seem consistent with his reformulated theories concerning representation,

expression, and narrative found in his book *Philosophy of Art* (Routledge, 2002) and throughout his extensive writings on aesthetics.

On a personal note, the trail of avant-garde arts that Carroll has documented in this volume is of special interest to this reviewer in that we have often moved along similar paths with respect to the developments in dance, performance art, avant-garde theater, and the visual arts. The content of this book reflects my similar inclinations toward the avant-garde arts, often grounded in first-hand knowledge of representative works from this era as producer, curator, and writer. In the interest of full disclosure, the three exhibition catalogue essays reprinted here were commissioned for exhibitions that I curated for the Haggerty Museum during my tenure as museum director.